

THE PANDEMIC AND MIGRATION CRISIS IN INDIA

Stories from the Hinterland

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Abstract

[The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed have brought to the fore societal fault lines across the globe. In a country like India, where economic inequality is being added to a society already fractured along the lines of caste, gender, religion and region, the pandemic and its accompanying policies have intensified these fault lines. If anything, the lockdown has disproportionately affected one large section of the population sans any social safety net, the ‘circular’ migrant workers. In India, the lockdown witnessed one of the largest exodus of migrant workers from the workplace to their homes. The arduous journey of these migrant workers was not easy; they had to face hunger, homelessness, insecurity and human rights violations. The circular migration, generally from rural peripheries to urban agglomerations, plays a crucial role in developing countries like India. The uneven regional development in India, with growth taking place at urban centres, has led to people migrating from rural to urban areas. These urban centres have become the hub for capitalistic expansion, which rests upon the cheap labour from the rural peripheries. They are mainly sourced from the historically marginalised social groups and lower-income states where these pools of labourers are in abundance.

Against this background, the study attempts to comprehend the impact of the pandemic on returnee migrant workers and their families. Moreover, it tries to assess the migrant households’ accessibility to various welfare measures provided by the government (for example, ration distribution, cash transfers, and employment opportunities in rural areas) and its overall impact on their lives. It further tries to comprehend various coping mechanisms that they might have adopted to overcome the loss of livelihood and income caused by the pandemic and its ensuing policies. For this purpose, a primary household survey of the returnee migrant households was conducted in one of the underdeveloped and migration prone regions – Kalahandi, Koraput, Nabarangpur and Rayagada – of the country. It has been

found that most of the returnee migrant workers were from the historically marginalised social groups, especially Dalits and Adivasis, who had to face systemic discrimination and human rights violation throughout their journey as well as upon their stay in the village. A substantial chunk of the returnee migrants could not access their entitlements, and most of them have been pushed into further indebtedness and destitution. Most importantly, they face Hobson's choice – whether they stay back without work or risk their lives for livelihood.]

Keywords: Circular Migration, Entitlements, Pandemic, Neo-liberal State, Uneven Development

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1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed have brought to the fore the societal fault lines across the globe (de Haan 2020). In a country like India, where economic inequality is being added to a society that is already fractured along the lines of caste, gender, religion and region, the pandemic and its accompanying policies have intensified these fault lines. In India, the lockdown was declared abruptly on 24 March 2020, giving people only four hours to manage their housebound life. The Prime Minister reminded the countrymen by evoking Hindu epic Ramayana to not cross the Laxman Rekha (one's doorstep) for the coming 21 days. The sudden announcement of lockdown brought entire economic activities to a standstill, heavily affecting the informal economy, which employs 93% of the total workers in the country. The lockdown rendered many footloose migrant workers working in urban and peri-urban areas jobless and homeless (Breman 2020). Their loss of employment threatened their access to food and temporary shelter. After a few days of the lockdown, they started emerging on the streets in large numbers, desperately trying to flee to their villages. In a few weeks of lockdown, the shocking visuals of the arduous journey of migrant workers – hunger, deprivation, human rights violation, accidents and deaths – started emerging in the country. In many ways, the spectacle of mass grief of the footloose labouring class rose the curtain to expose the spectre of the contemporary world of work.

The announcement of sudden lockdown and erratic measures to contain the pandemic, for example, coercive imposition of the inter-state mobility and forceful quarantine, cost millions of workers gravely. In the very first three weeks of the lockdown, according to the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), many workers (89%) not only lost their jobs but also did not receive their previous work pay from their employers; and most of them were left without food. A nationwide survey by Action Aid (2020, p. xvii), conducted towards the end of May 2020 (during the third phase of the lockdown), shows that as over three-fourths respondents had lost their livelihood and that half of them had not received any wages since the imposition of the lockdown. The hardship endured by women workers during the lockdown compared to their male counterparts was anything but worse; most of them lost their jobs, did not get paid, and experienced a huge loss of consumption. Moreover, more than half of the migrant workers reported having incurred additional debt during the lockdown (Action Aid, 2020; Azim Premji University 2020). Nearly all studies that were carried out to gauge the vulnerabilities of migrant workers found that most of them faced acute food shortages and human rights violations throughout the lockdown period.¹

¹ Some of the studies that was undertaken during the lockdown includes: Stranded Workers Action Networks (2020a, 2020b, 2020c); ActionAid (2020); Azim Premji University (2020); Jan Sahas (2020); Centre for Equity Studies (2020).

The pandemic related lockdowns and other policy responses from the central government claimed many poor's lives. However, when the question was raised in the Parliament about the number of migrant workers' deaths, the government remained in the denial mode by maintaining that 'no such data is available.' The data compiled between March to July 2020 shows that around a thousand people, predominantly migrant workers, died 'directly attributable to the lockdown.' Many reported deaths were caused due to, among other things, starvation and financial distress, travelling and exhaustion, suicides incited by despair and insecurities, denial of medical care and police brutality (Aman, Sharma, Krusha and Thejesh 2020). In all likelihood, these numbers would be a gross underestimation. It is well-known fact that most of the migrant workers who were forced to suffer and left to die during the lockdown were from historically marginalised social groups, especially Dalits (SC) and Adivasis (ST), mostly originating from lower income states (de Haan 2020; Srivastav 2020). According to SBI Ecowrap Report 2020, the states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and West Bengal has accounted for 90 per cent of total migrants; and it is estimated that around 58 lakhs migrants have gone back to their home states following the lockdown.²

In the aftermath of the lockdown on 26 March 2020, a stimulus package of 1.7 lakh crore was announced to provide relief to millions of poor. This package was abysmally low, constituting only 0.8 per cent of the GDP. Schemes like Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi Yojana (PM KISAN), minimum income support scheme, was repackaged as a relief measure (Merwin, 2020). The first instalment of Rs. 2000 to farmers was announced to be frontloaded to reach 87 million farmers in April 2020. The package also included providing free cooking gas to the poor, increased wage rate from Rs. 182 to Rs. 202 under MGNREGA, insurance cover of Rs. 50 lakhs to healthcare workers, provident fund benefit to the employees, an additional 5 kg of rice/wheat and 1 kg pulses for each of those covered under the National Food Security Act, direct cash transfers of Rs. 1000 to 30 million senior citizens, widows and disabled, Rs. 1500 to women with Jan Dhan account. States were asked to use the Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund (BCWWF) to provide relief to construction workers (The Hindu, 26 March 2020). On 12 May 2020 the government took a slew of measures to overcome the adverse effects of the pandemic amounting to 20 lakh crores. An estimate by the Institute of Human Development (IHD) revealed that relief measures could reach only a third of the country's total migrant workers. The study found that at least 50 million short-term circular migrants had been left out of any government identification process.

In consonance with the central government schemes, the state governments also introduced a number of measures. The Government of Odisha (GoO) declared COVID-19 to be a 'disaster' and empowered the government officials under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, and the Epidemic Disease Act

² There are no exact numbers of migrant workers who moved back since the lockdown; the estimates vary between 5 to 40 millions (de Haan 2020).

1897. In a historic move, on 19 April 2020, the Government of Odisha, as per Section 51 of the Disaster Management Act of 2005, empowered the Sarpanch with the power of a District Collector in their respective jurisdiction to fight back the pandemic. On 29 May 2020, the Government of Odisha announced Rs. 17,000 crore stimulus packages under the “Special Livelihood Intervention Plan” to “provide employment and income generation opportunities to the worst affected section of the society, including migrant workers and farmers.” The package included Rs. 6,440 crores for MGNREGA, which aimed to create 20 crore man-days for 46 lakh persons, and Rs. 140 crores for skill development of migrant workers. It was expected that the Panchayati Raj Department would train around 40,000 returnee migrant workers to enhance their employability. The package had also prioritised the agriculture and the allied sectors, industrial development – textile and medical parks, MSME, etc. (New Indian Express, 29 May 2020)

Against the aforementioned background, this paper tries to contextualise the arduous journey and lived experiences of returnee circular migrant workers of rural Odisha. In this study, an attempt has also been made to critically understand the various policies and welfare measures undertaken by the central and the state governments and their impact on the lives of migrant workers. The paper is organised as follows: Section 2 tries to contextualise the trends, patterns and characteristics of circular migration by critically engaging with the received theoretical and empirical literature. Section 3 gives a detailed account of the data and methodology used in the study. Section 4 places the circular migration from the study area in a historical-structural perspective. Section 5 provides key socio-economic profiles of the migrant workers and briefly discusses migration processes and work trajectories. Section 6 analyses migrant workers’ lockdown experiences – their encounters with different agencies, their access to various entitlements and their perception about the future migration. Section 7 concludes the study with some observations.

2. CONTEXTUALISING CIRCULAR MIGRATION

The footloose circular migrant labour, who are disproportionately drawn from the historically marginalised social groups, plays a substantial role in shaping the country’s new growth poles, which is unabated since the new economic reform. The urban and peri-urban agglomeration – primarily located in the northern, western and southern parts of the country - has become the hub for neoliberal capitalistic expansion, which rests upon the cheap labour from the rural peripheries (Srivastava, 2020). Since the capital wants to keep the cost of production as low as possible, it has started increasingly demanding the footloose labourers from the rural peripheries for whom they do not need to provide any sort of social security and entitlements. The footloose circular migrant workers, mostly drawn from the historically marginalised social groups (SC/ST) remain adrift between the permanent place of residence and the worksite. The circular migrant workers add up to nearly 45 million, constituting a major part of the informal economy, contributing around six per cent of the GDP (Economic Survey 2016-17). Other

estimates put the figure around 100 to 500 million (Srivastav 2020; Breman 2020; de Haan 2020). They are mainly sourced from the lower-income states where these pools of labourers are in abundance. The low-income states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha contribute significantly to circular migration (Srivastava, 2020).

The early theorisation of the development of capitalist society through migration was put forward by Arthur Lewis (1954). The crux of his argument was that the capitalist sector (could be rural plantations or mining as well), which is more productive, engages the labour from the subsistence sector at a slightly higher wage than the subsistence sector and expands till all the labour from the subsistence sector is absorbed. The wage of the capitalist sector would rise once the surplus labour was absorbed. This theorisation of migration by mainstream economists like Lewis (1954) gives a naïve picture of the more complex labour processes. In reality, the capitalist development does not ensure that all the labourers are treated equally, at par with individual attributes, instead it exploits existing structural cleavages through a 'segmented' labour market. This strategy helps keep the cost of production low while maintaining the dominant social structure. India epitomises the most rigid form of labour market segmentation. The existence of caste in India and "... identity-based social oppression makes it inseparable from class relations." (Shah and Lerche 2018, p.1). The caste identities are deeply entrenched in the class relation in the capitalist economy.

Segmentation of the labour market in India is the outcome of the conjugated oppression that exists. Conjugated oppression refers to class relations that are constituted and shaped by various modes of oppression – caste, gender and region, in capitalist accumulation (Shah and Lerche 2018). The kind of occupation that the people are engaged in depends largely on their caste position. Thus, as a direct fallout of this, "the labour process is divided into different submarket or sub-processes, or segments, distinguished by different characteristics, behavioural rules and working conditions" (Srivastava 2019). Historically, Dalits, Adivasis and the Shudras comprised the most oppressed castes in India. Dalits constituted landless agricultural labourers and manual workers who were subordinated by higher caste groups. Compared to the Dalits, the Adivasis had more access to the means of production and were away from the dominant caste groups. Nevertheless, the dominant caste groups also treated them as 'untouchables' and were considered savage and wild. The appropriation of forest land of the Adivasis during the colonial period led to rebellions as well as their movement towards remoter areas (Shah and Lerche 2018).

However, in the period following Independence and a drive towards capitalist society, these two groups and other backward Castes witnessed integration into the labour market adversely (Kannan 2018). The segmentation of the labour market that existed in the feudal society spilt into the capitalist society as well. An apt summation of the labour market segmentation in India was given by Dr BR Ambedkar "The Caste System is not merely a division of labourers which is quite different from division of

labour—it is a hierarchy in which the divisions of labourers are graded one above the other”. The spread of capitalism reinforced the existing relations of dominations (Shah and Lerche 2018). Thus, the historically determined status influenced the access to education and other endowments (Srivastava 2019). The internalisation of the caste system by especially the employers hindered individuals from venturing into “other” categories of labour. When the whole labour process moved towards informalisation in general (NCEUS 2007), this had severe ramifications for the structurally marginalised groups. The migration of labour to vulnerable occupations is a direct result of the existing caste structures. In order to undercut the wages of the local labour, the capitalists often employed migrant labour. These migrants most often are partly agricultural workers and partly informal workers (Shah and Lerche 2018).

Table 1. Occupation across Social Groups (last five years) (in percentage)

Occupational Groups	Forward/ General	OBC	SC	ST	Muslims	Total
Professionals, Administrative, Executive, Managerial Workers etc.	10.3	1.3	0.3	0.0	1.1	1.6
Clerical and Related Workers	8.8	2.2	1.0	0.3	1.1	2.0
Agriculture and Allied Activities	10.6	18.0	20.2	38.0	8.2	19.6
Construction	15.2	26.1	33.8	22.8	26.1	27.1
Brickkiln	3.1	9.6	11.7	12.4	9.8	10.1
Mining & Manufacturing (Other than Textile)	11.4	10.5	9.9	11.8	8.5	10.3
Textile	4.2	5.2	3.2	1.5	10.0	4.5
Other Workers (n.e.c)	10.2	8.8	6.2	3.8	4.9	7.0
Menial & Other Services	17.6	12.6	9.1	8.1	19.3	12.2
Shopkeepers/Sellers/Vendors	7.8	5.1	4.0	1.3	9.8	5.0
Housewives, Student/too Young & Out of Labour Force	0.8	0.6	0.6	0.1	1.2	0.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Authors’ Calculation Based on IHDS 2011-12

In order to have a broad understanding of this employment segmentation among the migrant workers across social groups and gender, we have used the Indian Human Development Survey (2011-12). A disaggregation of the data shows that a higher proportion of migrant labourers from the forward castes are engaged in professional and clerical work compared to the other castes (see Table 1). These two sectors, in general, have more secure employment than the other sectors. The most exploitative sector, such as the construction industry, employs more than one-third of migrant workers. The OBC, SC, and ST are at the lower rung of India’s caste structure have a significant presence in the construction and brickkiln industries. The SCs and STs have 46 percent and 34 percent of their labour force engaged in construction and brickkiln. Along with the SCs and STs, the other marginalised groups such as the OBCs and the Muslims, also have an overwhelming presence in this sector. The second most popular

site of work for migrant workers is in the agriculture sector, which is predominantly banks upon SC/ST labourers.

Table 2. Labour Recruitment across Social Groups

Social Groups	Contractor	With a Job	Without a Job	Total
Forward/General	46.76	36.44	16.81	100
OBC	43.7	38.49	17.8	100
SC	52.65	32.48	14.87	100
ST	67.2	28.91	3.89	100
Others	35.12	41.21	23.67	100
Muslims	49.92	33.92	16.17	100
Total	50.56	34.66	14.77	100

Source: Authors' Calculation Based on IHDS 2011-12

The new relations of production, which rely heavily on migrant labour, have witnessed a new class of contractors belonging to the dominant castes (Lerche and Shah 2018). The estimates from the IHDS data show that nearly half of the migrant labour is recruited through contractors (see Table 2). This percentage is higher for the STs who migrants mostly for agriculture, construction and brick kiln sectors. The contractors pay the workers in advance and at times take a significant cut of their wages (Shah and Lerche 2018). Moreover, there have been cases of the contractors severing hands of the migrant workers who managed to escape from the brick kiln (The Hindu, 17 December 2013). These harsh conditions under which the migrant labourers are employed and the squalid conditions they are forced to live in resonates neo-bondage (Srivastava 2019).

3. DATA AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Out of seven KBK districts³ of Odisha, India, four districts, namely, Kalahandi, Koraput, Nabarangpur and Rayagada were purposively selected for the study. These districts are located in the same geographical proximity and share more or less the same historical developments. The region has a high prevalence of distress outmigration, at least since the late 1990s.⁴ From these identified districts, eight community development blocks were purposively selected (two blocks from each) on the basis of the following criteria: a history of distress seasonal and circular outmigration with different patterns and directions; and blocks representing different agro-climatic regions within the district (Mishra 2020). Four Gram Panchayats (GPs), the nodal agency for enumerating and quarantining returnee migrant labourers, were randomly selected from each block. For this study, total 120 returnee migrant households (fifteen from each block) were interviewed – 53 (44.2%) ST, 49 (40.8%) SC and 18 (15%) OBC. To locate the returnee migrant households in a given Gram Panchayat – at least one household member must have returned home from his/her place of work after the nationwide lockdown – information was sought from the local Sarpanch and GP officials. In case where information was not

³ For the detailed discussion on KBK region, see Section 3.

⁴ <https://statedashboard.odisha.gov.in/>

facilitated by the GP officials or otherwise, a linear snowball sampling method was conducted to identify the sample households. While recruiting the sample using the snowball sampling technique, however, it was taken into consideration that an adequate number of households from across social groups (SC/ST/OBC) were represented in the sample. It was also kept in mind that the selected returnee migrant households should be as diverse as possible. For example, in some cases, the returnee migrant had only himself/herself migrated, and in other instances, the entire family had migrated along with children. For the study, a structured interview schedule was used to collect all necessary information. Based on the information, selected respondents were interviewed to understand the various dimensions of migration dynamics and their lived experiences during the pandemic. The survey was conducted in the month of November-December 2020 by Harsha Trust, Bhubaneswar, in association with Odisha Dialogues; the authors were part of it.

3. A BRIEF HISTORY OF LABOUR MIGRATION FROM ODISHA⁵

Odisha has a long history of labour migration. Like any other region, the state's migration history follows a discreet pattern, varying across agro-climatic regions, space and social groups. Based on the history and intensity of outmigration, the Government of Odisha has officially recognised eleven districts as migration prone districts of the state, namely, Kalahandi, Nuapada, Bolangir, Subarnapur, Koraput, Nabarangpur, Rayagada, Bargarh, Gajapati, Ganjam, and Khurda (The Telegraph, 10 April 2018). The outmigration from the Western and Southern regions (the first nine districts) involves a very different historical process than the Coastal region (the last two districts). These processes get reflected in the migration patterns and outcomes. Much of the Western and Southern districts fall in what is known as the Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput (KBK) region in the official parlance of the state. The distressed-driven seasonal/circular migration from this region is very much structural in nature and has its root in the historical processes of exploitation and marginalisation (Mishra 2020). The KBK region, which is known for its high prevalence of poverty and malnourishment, has a relatively high concentration of Adivasi (ST) and Dalit (SC) population and figure disproportionately in the key indicators of deprivation. Most of these historically marginalised social groups take recourse in seasonal/circular migration as one of their social and subsistence agricultural reproduction bases. Therefore, any attempt to understand distress migration from this region should be traced in historical processes of political and economic marginalisation of these social groups, especially Adivasi, in the hand of feudal and colonial power.

The KBK region forms the Western rolling uplands and the Southern plateaus of Odisha, located in Eastern India. The historical records suggest that the region has a long-chequered history of marginalisation and distress migration (Deo 1990 and Ludden 1999). The prevailing power structure,

⁵ The aim of this section is to provide a brief overview of historical development in the region that have played a significant role in the shaping the contemporary context of outmigration.

caste-class relation, tribal and non-tribal interaction and land relation has its roots in pre-colonial development. The region has historically been ruled by the ‘indigenous chiefs and chiefs of obscure origin.’ As a result, the ‘good will’ had prevailed among kings towards their subjects (Deo 1990). However, with the advent of the British Raj, the prevailing patrimonial relation started changing, giving rise to a highly exploitative land revenue system. The British Raj’s unabated demand for exorbitant revenue pushed the king to pass on the burden to the peasants by levying heavy taxation. To increase the revenue, settled agriculture was encouraged, and skilled peasants from upper and middle castes were invited from other regions. Moreover, in order to increase the land revenue income, the kings started appointing *Zamindars* (owner of an estate) and *Thekedars* (land contract holder) from middle and upper castes – often an ‘outsider’ – to mediate between the subjects (tenants) and the king. This process led to massive indiscriminate exploitation of peasants and tenants and subsequent transfer of their land to these ‘newcomers’ (Deo 1990, Pati 1999 and Kalahandi District Gazetteer 1990).⁶ During the Colonial period, due to the reconfiguration of property rights, many adivasi and peasantry were pushed to remote forest of the region (Deo 1990).

The colonial period that saw a massive reconfiguration of social and political power in favour of newly established zamindars and thekedars belonging to the upper castes did not alter their dominance radically rather, it went on unabated in post-colonial India. The erstwhile zamindars reinvented themselves as ‘democratically’ elected ‘neo-patrimonial’ heads of their newly enfranchised subjects (Mohanty 1990; Mishra 2011). The post-colonial development in the state is marked by the building of big dams, heavy steel industries, and lately massive investment in extractive industries. It was not until the advent of neo-liberal economic forces in the early 1990s that the unabated coercive dispossession began in this region. The political elites’ penchant for industrialisation through ruthless mineral exploitation as an only ‘development’ narrative undermined the very development of ‘inland’ regions, overwhelmingly inhabited by historically marginalised social groups (Kundan Kumar 2014). As a result, historically marginalised social groups of this region continue to figure disproportionately on the key indicators of deprivation. The distress driven outmigration from this region is an outcome of, on the one hand, the way capitalist development has played out in systematically dispossessing and marginalising certain social groups (SC/ST) by exploiting existing structural cleavages based on *purity* and *pollution* and, on the other hand, are the results of ‘neo-patrimonial’ state’s failure in providing meaningful livelihood alternatives in the region (Mishra 2020).⁷

⁶ The rise in land alienation and exploitation, saw one of the biggest mobilisation of Kandhs, Ganda, Gouda and Ghasi in ex-state of Kalahandi. It was not only an identity base (Kandh meli) mobilisation but all other social class (gouda, ganda, and ghasi) also participated in the revolution as well (Fanindam Deo 1990).

5. MIGRANT WORKERS AND THEIR WORLD OF WORK

The characteristic of migrant households reflects their position in the social structure of the region. In our study of 120 migrant households (see Table 3), we found most of them to be land poor – 38.3 % landless and 43.3% marginal landholders; more than half of Dalits are landless (see Table 4). However, very few households reported having more than five acres of land without any irrigation or credit facilities at their disposal. This gets reflected in household occupation. More than one-third of the households are engaged in cultivation, and around one-fifth of them work as agricultural wage labour. More than one-third of them work as non-agricultural wage labour (NAWL) in construction (26.7%), service (6.75) and brickkiln (4.2%). It has been noticed that Dalits are overrepresented in the construction and service sector, whereas none of the Adivasi households are engaged in the service sector. Education attainment is very low; around half of the population is illiterate and one-third of them have not gone beyond upper-primary (see Table 3). Low education among migrant workers gets reflected in their awareness and access to various labour entitlements. A little over one-third of them had labour cards. It was no surprise that a negligible 3.3% had registered themselves under the Construction Workers' Act and 13.3% under ISMW Act (see Figure 1).

The socio-economic background echoes in the migrant workers' characteristics and agency. Out of the total household members, one-third of them were returnee migrant workers. More than two-thirds of migrant workers were male, and around three-fourth of them were illiterate and below primary (as good as illiterate). Most of the migrants are in the age group of 30-59 and married; whereas, around one-third of migrant workers were found to be unmarried and in the age group of 15-29 years. Around half of them were never to the school, and a quarter had just attended schooling at primary and upper primary levels. It has been observed more than two-thirds of migrants work in the construction and brickkiln sectors. Whereas nearly one-third of the migrant workers were found to be engaged in the service sector (hotel/shops etc.), garment industry, seafood industry and other miscellaneous activities. However, in the recent past, one could see a gradual shift in occupation composition and direction of migration (see Table 5). Most of the migration flow from this region are inter-state in nature and varies significantly across the source districts and social groups. The southern states are among the most important destination for the migrant workers from this region.

Table 3. Distribution of Migrant Households and Migrant Workers by Select Background Characteristics
(in column percentage)

Variables	Migrant Households				Migrant Workers			
	ST	SC	OBC	Total	ST	SC	OBC	Total
Sex								
Male	54.9	49.4	59.4	53.4	72.8	67.5	72.4	70.6
Female	45.1	50.7	40.6	46.6	27.2	32.5	27.6	29.4
Total Members	(235)	(231)	(96)	(562)	(81)	(77)	(29)	(187)
Age-Group								
0-14	26.4	23.8	20.8	24.4	11.1	2.6	13.8	8.0
15-29	31.5	34.6	29.2	32.4	35.8	40.3	41.4	38.5
30-59	33.2	32.5	41.7	34.3	44.4	54.5	44.8	48.7
60 & above	8.9	9.1	8.3	8.9	8.6	2.6	0.0	4.8
Marital Status								
Married	51.1	52.8	56.3	52.7	65.4	74.0	48.3	66.3
Unmarried	44.3	43.7	42.7	43.8	33.3	24.7	51.7	32.6
Widow/Widower	4.7	3.5	1.0	3.6	1.2	1.3	0.0	1.1
Education								
No Education	56.6	42.2	40	47.8	53.1	46.8	37.9	48.1
Primary & Upper	27.8	15.2	23.5	21.9	30.9	20.8	27.6	26.2
High School	7.1	19.4	14.1	13.4	11.1	20.8	13.8	15.5
Higher Secondary	1.9	5.2	5.9	3.9	1.2	5.2	13.8	4.8
Graduate & above	0.5	4.3	0	2	0.0	5.2	0.0	2.1
Principal Occupation								
Agriculture & Allied	64.2	30.6	44.5	47.5	-	-	-	-
Agri. Wage Labour	18.9	6.1	16.7	7.5	-	-	-	-
Construction	11.3	44.9	22.2	26.7	33.3	33.3	28.0	32.6
Brickkiln	3.8	6.1	0	4.2	56.9	24.0	20.0	37.2
Services Sector	0	10.2	16.7	6.7	6.9	16.0	24.0	13.4
Garment/Mat Factory	-	-	-	-	0.0	12.0	16.0	7.6
Sea Food Industry	-	-	-	-	1.4	4.0	0.0	2.3
Miscellaneous*	1.9	2	0	1.7	1.4	10.7	12.0	7.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Out of 187, 15 (M 10, F5) were children. For the above analysis, children have been excluded.

Miscellaneous includes various odd jobs in cement, plastic, paper, automobile, gas, oil, water, boat, meat company etc. A very few household members also work as a health worker and panchayat peon at village.

Source: Field Survey 2020

Table 4. Distribution of Land Ownership across Social Groups (in percentage)

Land Holding	ST	SC	OBC	Total
Landless	24.5	53.1	38.9	38.3
Marginal	49.1	38.8	38.9	43.3
Small	13.2	4.1	16.7	10
Semi-Medium	13.2	4.1	5.6	8.3

Note: Landless=less than 0.02 acres; Marginal = less than 2.47 acres; Small = 2.47 to 4.94 acres; and Semi-medium = 4.94 to 9.88 acres (Classification based on NSSO 70th Round)

Source: Field Survey 2020.

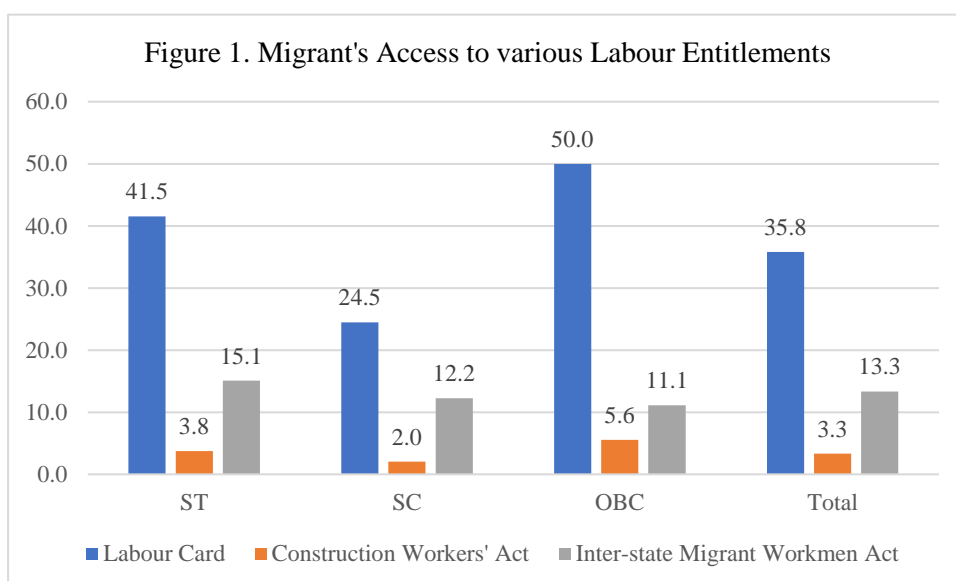


Table 5. Migrants Last worked States before the Pandemic across Origin Districts and Social Groups (in percentage)

Destination States	KORA	KALA	NABA	RAYA	ST	SC	OBC	Total
Andhra Pradesh	100	-	3.3	6.7	54.7	6.1	5.6	27.5
Telangana	-	10	16.7	13.3	9.4	2	33.3	10
Tamil Nadu	-	6.7	53.3	10	13.2	26.5	5.6	17.5
Kerala	-	50	10	66.7	15.1	53.1	22.2	31.7
Karnataka	-	6.7	3.3	-	-	4.1	5.6	2.5
Goa	-	26.7	-	-	5.7	6.1	11.1	6.7
Maharashtra	-	-	6.7	-	-	-	11.1	1.7
Rajasthan	-	-	6.7	-	-	2	5.6	1.7
Odisha	-	-	-	3.3	1.9	-	-	0.8
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note: KORA-Koraput, KALA- Kalahandi, NABA- Nabarangpur and RAYA-Rayagada

Source: Field Survey 2020.

It has been noticed that most migrants (mostly Adivasi) from Koraput go to the brickkiln sector in Andhra Pradesh. Whereas migrant workers from Kalahandi and Rayagada, mostly SC and OBC, prefer to go to Kerala and Goa in the construction and service sector. Migrant workers from this region go through different processes of recruitment – through sardars (local labour contractors at origin), builders and contractors (at destination), through friends and relatives, and nakas (spot labour market at destination). The processes vary greatly across social groups and occupation choice, so as the outcome. It has been found that most of the workers in our sample had got recruited through sardars, whereas friends and relatives (social networks) have emerged as one of the important categories of work mediation (see Figure 2). Historically, seasonal migration from this region into the brickkiln industry takes place in lean agricultural season, right after Nuakahai (a local harvest festival). Sardars recruit labour (often *pathuria*, a group of three – a man and child) by paying advance money to cement control

over their labour power. This indebted labour (neo-bondage) are then taken to the worksites, where they work at piece-rate in very precarious conditions. Nearly half of the migrant workers had taken advance before migration to meet various contingencies, such as marriage, medical expenses and so on (see Table 6).

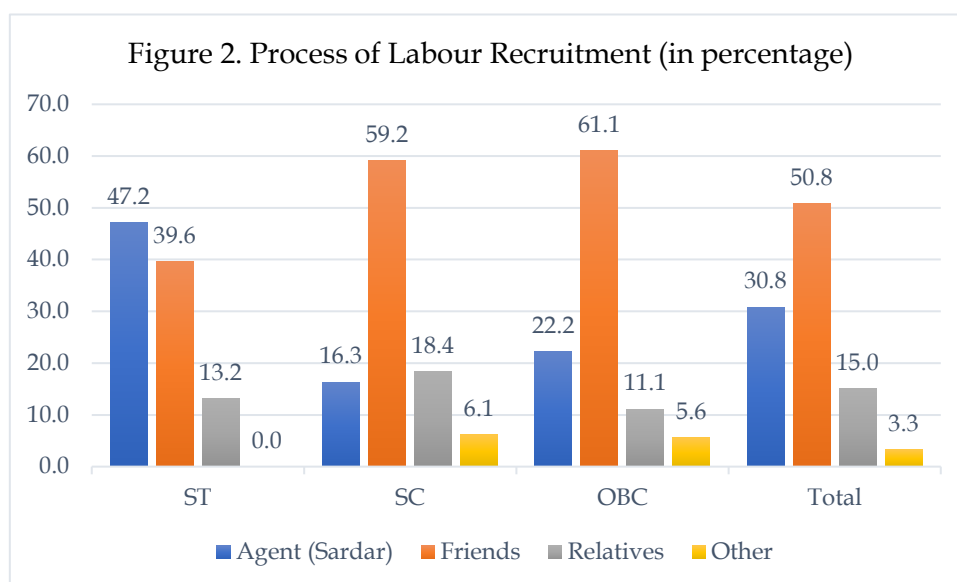


Table 6. Advance amount across Social Groups (Before the Pandemic)

Social Groups	Less than ₹10000	₹10001 - ₹20000	₹20001 - ₹50000	More than ₹50000
ST	31.0	41.4	27.6	0.0
SC	60.9	8.7	30.4	0.0
OBC	50.0	16.7	16.7	16.7
Total	44.8	25.9	27.6	1.7

Source: Field Survey 2020.

The uncertainty around agriculture, ever-shrinking production share, and lack of alternative livelihood opportunities in the locality pushing many young generations for considering migration as a viable livelihood option. In this region, outmigration, especially among the youth, is no longer aligned with the agricultural production cycle, which follows a seasonal pattern, rather it has increasingly become irregular and sporadic. Most of the youths migrate round the year, and sometimes for a longer duration. The family history of the migrant worker shows that most of them are ‘first-generation’ migrant workers – migrating for the very first time in their family lineage. Most of these young people are migrating as far as possible in diverse informal sectors.

The old generation never used to migrate. They were not smart enough to migrate; even they were scared to go outside. The youngsters do not like to sit idle at home. Nowadays, even young

girls from our neighbouring villages are migrating to Chennai to work in the textile industry (Field Survey 2020).

In our sample, we found that as many as 89.2 percent of the total migrant workers – almost all STs and OBCs – were the ‘first generation’ migrant workers. However, this number was slightly less for the SCs who were the first to migrate for works. For most of these young people, as Farley puts it, ‘migration is mostly about survival but also about adventure’ (as cited in Mosse et. al. 2005, p. 3026). Further, it has been revealed that most of the migrant workers (43.3%) have worked for less than a year in their lifetime. This means that around half of them had started migrating a year back only. Only around one-tenth of them had been migrating for more than ten years. It has been found that SCs have a long history of migration than any other social groups and that STs have just recently joined the rank (see Table 7).

Table 7. Working Duration of Migrant Workers *(in percentage)*

Duration of Migration	ST	SC	OBC	Total
Less than 1 Year	49.1	34.7	50.0	43.3
More than 1 and less than 3 Years	18.9	16.3	27.8	19.2
More than 3 and less than 5 Years	17.0	18.4	5.6	15.8
More than 6 and less than 10 Years	11.3	12.2	5.6	10.8
More than 10 Years	3.8	18.4	11.1	10.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Field Survey 2020.

6. MIGRANT WORKERS’ ARDUOUS JOURNEY TO HOMELAND: HOPE AND DESPAIR

Returning back home after the lockdown was not easy for any migrant workers. Most of them had to face various difficulties and personal challenges depending on their work location, access to various conveniences, and, most importantly, employers’ and destination state government’s attitude towards migrant workers. While commuting was relatively easy for those working in nearby states compared to those working in far-off states like Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Kerala. Most migrants (more than two-thirds) had to seek help from various agencies to reach home. More than one-third of them took the help of the Government of Odisha, whereas a little over one-quarter sought help from friends. Those who had migrated to brickkiln had to seek travel convenience and financial help from sardars (labour contractors). This shows the intensity of dependence of Adivasi migrant workers on sardars for work and their welfare, who are also happened to be their most ‘intimate exploiters’ (see Table 8). However, during the lockdown, most of the migrant workers had to manage their travel expenses. Only one-quarter of the respondents said they received financial help from the host and home governments (Table 9). A very negligible number of migrants received support from the employer. Interestingly, a very few (13.3%) who had registered under the ISMWA could secure ‘journey allowance’ from the employer.

Table 8. Help Sought by the Migrants across Social Groups (in percentage)

Social Groups	Family Members	Friends	Employer	Odisha Govt.	Agent / Sardar
ST	8.7	17.4	2.2	28.3	43.5
SC	6.9	34.5	3.4	55.2	0
OBC	12.5	50	0	37.5	0
Total	8.4	26.5	2.4	38.5	24.1

Source: Field Survey 2020.

Table 9. Travel Support (Financial) Received by the Migrant Workers

Social Groups	Self-financed	Employer	Govt: Host	Govt: Home	Other
ST	35.9	3.8	17	13.2	30.2
SC	67.4	2	24.5	2	4.1
OBC	72.2	0	22.2	0	5.6
Total	54.2	2.5	20.8	6.7	15.8

Source: Field Survey 2020.

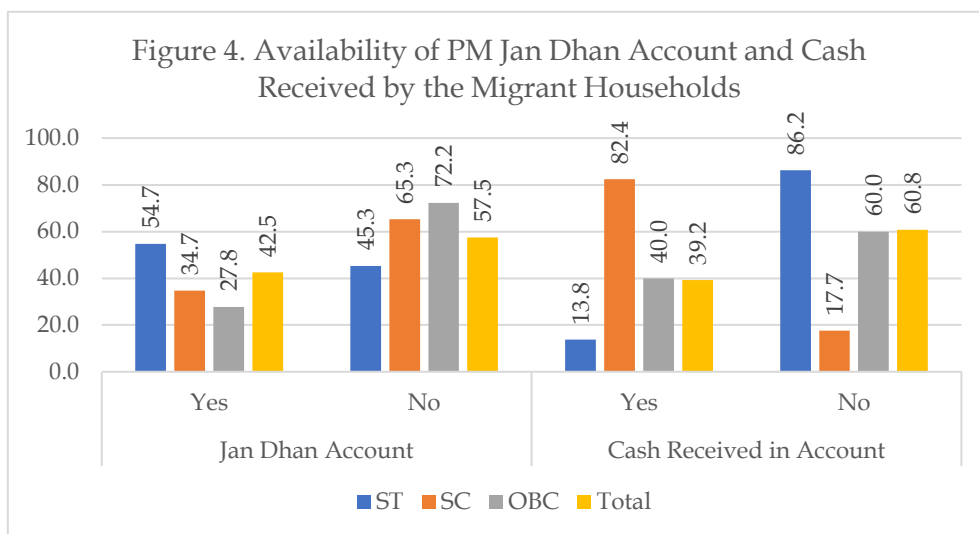
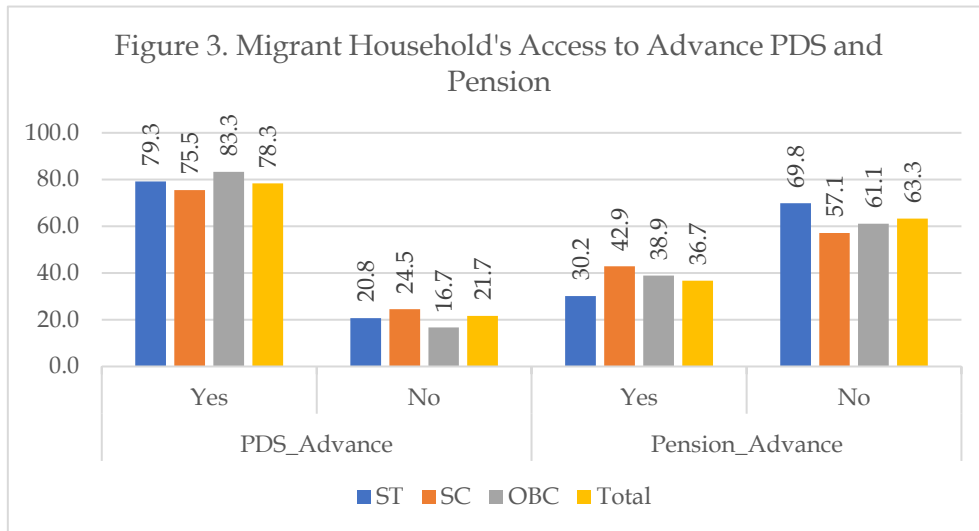
6.1 PANDEMIC AND ACCESS TO ENTITLEMENTS

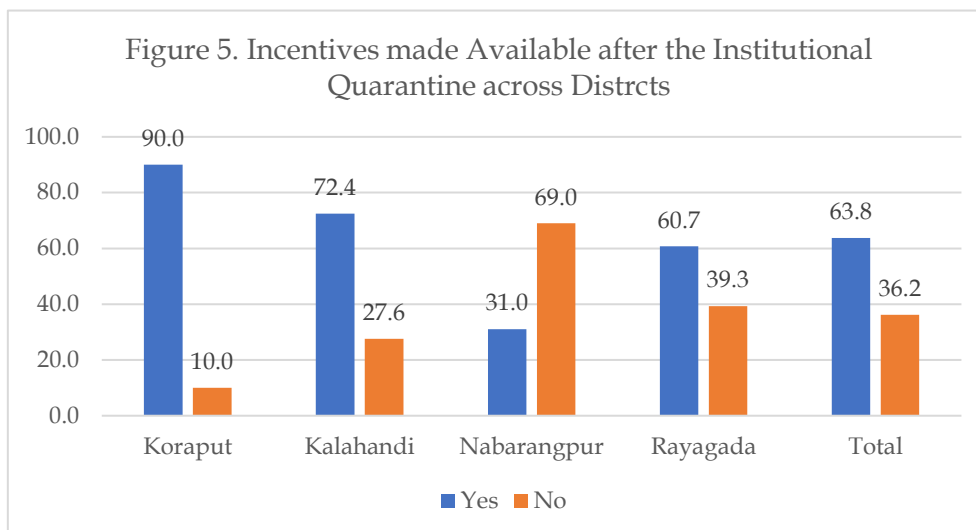
The Central and the state government had announced different relief packages for both migrant and non-migrant households to cope with the pandemic. The central government allowed beneficiaries of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) to lift their quota of subsidised food grains for six months in one go and the proposal of states lifting three months foodgrains quota from the Food Corporation of India (FCI). Under the Food Security scheme, the Odisha Government distributed three months advance PDS ration to all the beneficiaries and ₹1,000 each to all the 94 lakh PDS beneficiaries. Figure 3 shows that more than three-fourth of migrant households had received three months advance ration from the government. However, nearly two-thirds of migrant households reported not to have received the amount when it comes to pension, and this is more or less comparable across social groups.

A vital component of the relief package announced by the Finance Minister of the Government of India (GoI) on 26 March 2020 in response to the Coronavirus pandemic was a direct cash transfer of ₹1500 in three monthly instalments (April-June 2020) to all 0.2 billion women having Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) bank accounts.⁸ More than half of migrant households reported not having a PMJDY bank account (see Figure 4). For those who had an account, only a little over one-third had received the amount. This number was as high as 86% for tribal households. Likewise, the Government of Odisha had incentivised ₹2000 to each returnee migrant to quarantine themselves at the state-run quarantine facilities. Nearly one-third of migrant workers, who completed mandated isolation at

⁸ Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) is the flagship financial inclusion scheme of GoI for the poor. It envisages universal access to banking facilities with at least one basic banking account for every household; financial literacy, access to credit insurance, and pension facility.

institutional quarantine centres, reported not receiving the cash benefits. This number was high as 69% and 39.3% for the district like Nabarangpur and Rayagada (see Figure 5).





During the lockdown, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a ‘right to work’ programme which ensures a minimum of 100 days of work to rural households, had come up as one of the biggest policy responses to augment income loss of migrant workers. To our surprise, we found that only half of the households had accessed to MGNREGA (job card). More than half of those households had only one job card, and a quarter had each two and three job cards. Only a little over one-third had sought work under the act in the last year. More than two-thirds of the households acknowledged that they have not heard about such policy, and some could not have the job because of bureaucratic difficulties. Most of the migrant workers face petty corruption and unnecessary delay in securing job cards.

It has been more than one year when I had applied for the job card by paying Rs 400. Till now, I have not received my card. That is why I do not get any job under the scheme or housing benefit. We live in a mud house that has only one room (Field Survey 2020).

Bureaucratic delayed in wage payment was also one of the reasons cited for not having the card. One of the respondents wrathfully said: “Panchayat caters some work [MGNREGA] in between; however, it does not give wage for months. Only lunatic can think of working in such work programmes.” It was against this background that the impact of MGNREGA has to be sought during the lockdown. During the nationwide lockdown, most migrant households (87.5%) reported to have not received any work or unemployment benefits under the act. Those who got work were still waiting for their wage to come.

During the lockdown, some of us got work [under MGNREGA]. However, I have not received any wage until now. The officials pay us less than what is mandated. We have to wait for around 45 to 60 days for wage, which breaks down my morale and hope in this programme.

6.2 PANDEMIC AND INDEBTEDNESS

During the lockdown, almost all migrant households had to bank upon borrowing for their necessary social reproduction in one form or other. In the rural setting, a different form of borrowing was in operation. Most households had resorted to hand loans (often interest-free, sometimes it amounts to friendly loans) from relatives and local shopkeepers. The migrant households had procured necessary food items on credit, often at an exorbitantly high price, from a local shopkeeper. Figure 6 shows that a little over one-fourth of migrant households had borrowed from the local shopkeepers, and one-third of them had resorted to their friends and relatives. Interestingly, around one-tenth of the households reported having borrowed from Self Help Group (SHG), at a very low interest rate. Many of the respondents had urged the need of having more drawing facilities through SHGs. The multitude of hand loans sought by the households shows their deprivation and helplessness to meet even their daily needs. Towards the end of the third phase of lockdown, around half of the households had already plummeted in indebtedness with an exorbitantly high interest rate (see Table 10).

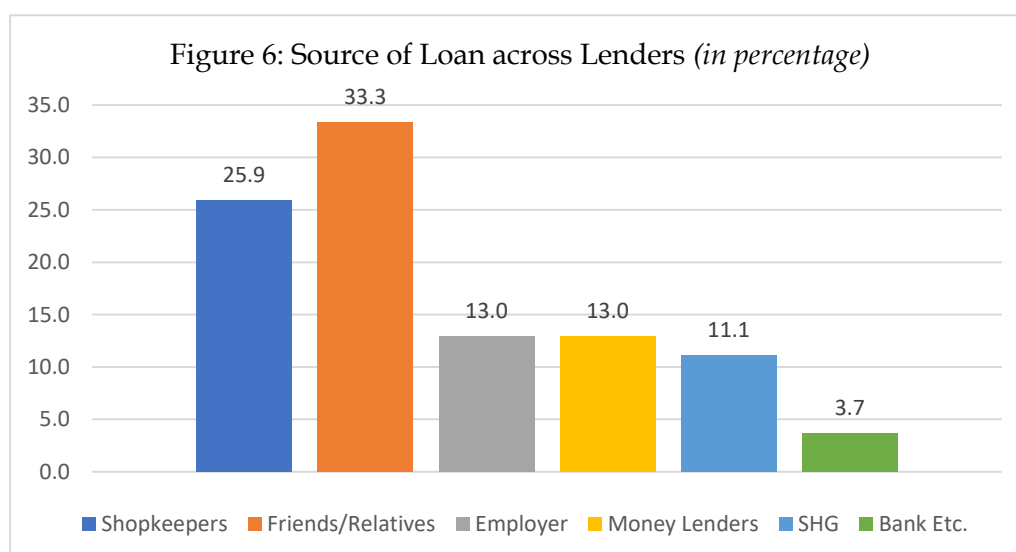


Table 10. Debt Particulars of Migrant Households (*in percentage*)

Social Groups	Indebted	Less than ₹5000	₹5000-₹10000	More than ₹10000
ST	43.4	56.5	30.4	13.0
SC	53.1	42.3	26.9	30.8
OBC	27.8	40.0	40.0	20.0
Total	45.0	48.1	29.6	22.2

Source: Field Survey 2020.

6.3 THE EXTENT OF INCOME AND CONSUMPTION DECLINE

It was logical to assume that the hardship brought about by the pandemic must have shattered the economy of many households, both rural and urban, across the country. However, the intensity at which the pandemic hit migrants has no parallel. Like any other large sample study, migrant households from the study region also witnessed a steady decline in their income and consumption basket following the prolonged lockdown. More than half of them registered a complete decline and around one-third considerable decline in the household income (see Table 11). These figures largely correspond with the consumption pattern as well. Those who had land and other related entitlements got absorbed in the agrarian economy during the lockdown. However, getting meaningful employment back home remained a challenge, especially for landless Dalits and women. For many, as one of the young migrant workers aged below 25 with an exasperated look said, “life has only one *shatru* [enemy] that is unemployment”.

There is no employment opportunity available in the locality. The government has only given ₹2000 and have failed to provide any employment. As a reason, we are living in great difficulty. Since there is a need to survive ourselves, we have been forced to go to rivers, streams, and forests to collect forest products and stones. From stone, we are making small-small metals, and from there, we are earning subsistence amounts. One does not get paid according to the time spent in doing these unskilled works. In this challenging time, government provisioning such as food provisioning, widow and old age pension etc., remains only survival hope (Field Survey 2020).

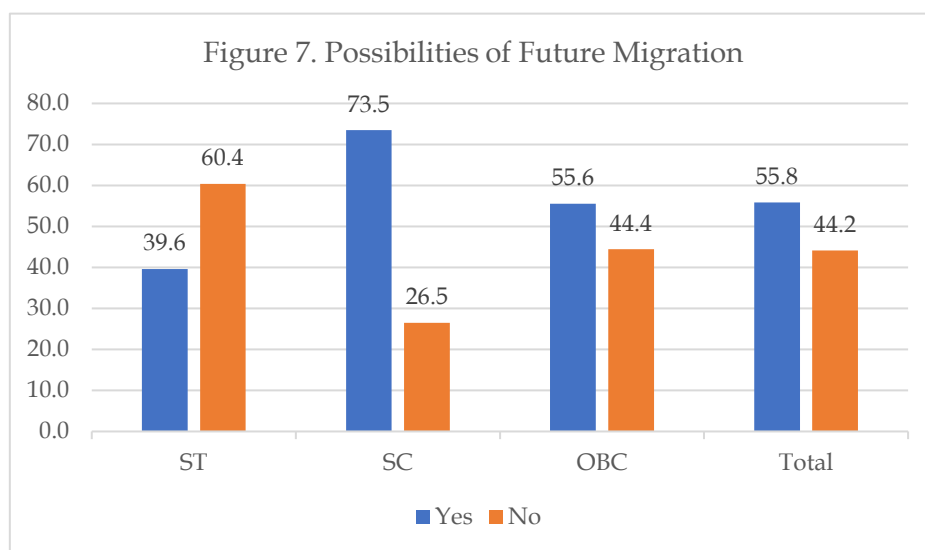
Social Groups	Income Depletion			Consumption Depletion		
	Completely	A Great Extent	Somewhat	Completely	A Great Extent	Somewhat
ST	49.1	28.3	22.6	22.6	50.9	22.6
SC	53.1	42.9	4.1	24.5	67.4	8.2
OBC	61.1	33.3	5.6	38.9	38.9	22.2
Total	52.5	35	12.5	25.8	55.8	16.7

Source: Field Survey 2020.

The impact of lockdown on gender was enormous. Most of the women migrant workers we interviewed faced various difficulties throughout the lockdown, be it at the worksite or back home. Rebati and Pramila (name changed), age about 25 years, who had with great difficulty secured a job at a prawn company in Andhra Pradesh with the help of a local labour contractor. After the lockdown, they have been rendered jobless and left with no option than digging their barren field with utter hopelessness.

While lamenting the government’s abrupt lockdown, they said: “Whatever promise the government had made about providing employment opportunity in the locality has come out to be untrue. We have not received any work yet.” Many women workers also manoeuvred different strategies to cope with the lockdown. However, it did not come to any rescue. For Alma (name changed), who used to work in brickkiln along with her family (husband and four minor children), migration was only source of income. While struggling for meaningful employment back home, she said:

During the lockdown, road repair work [MGNREGA] had come to our village. My husband dug two *goti* (a local unit to measure soil digging) in five days, but he has not received his due yet. We tried looking for work here. However, we have gotten any. We, three women, have made a self-help group. But we have not got any benefit of it. What else we do? My family has loaded ten tractors of stone, but we have been paid only Rs 100. What hope should we have? During the lockdown, we are digging out sweet potato (*kanda*) from the forest. However, due to the lockdown, we are unable to sell it in the market. Our everything, income, consumption have fallen due to the lockdown. We have not received any work from the government as well, which is why we migrate (Field Survey 2020).



The exhaustion of social supports and failed efforts to find decent work in the locality are strengthening the workers’ disposition to migrate again. “How would we repay our loans? We are feeling frustrated sitting idle at home. We do not have any option other than migrating for work. We will work till our last breath; this is all we can do.” More than half of migrant workers expressed their willingness to migrate again if the situation mellows down. One’s social location strongly moulds the perception about future migration in the village economy. For most of the landless labourers in the region, migration remains the only option for social reproduction. More than half of them wanted to migrate again, whereas this number was close to three-fourth for the Dalit. Rendo and Brunda (name changed), an

Adivasi couple, who had been working in the brickkiln sector in Andhra Pradesh for the last seven years, while rebuking the lockdown, said:

The [central] government is acting at its will. What can be said to the government? The Odisha government has done the right thing. It got us home. However, it has also committed one mistake; it has failed to provide us with work. That is why we are migrating. Otherwise, why one would have migrated. With every passing day, we are struggling to survive here. We are waiting for the lockdown to go so that we can migrate again. We would have spent six months over there and got some money to spend in the monsoon season. We would have cultivated corn in the rainy season. We work in scorching summer so that we can survive the monsoon in the village! (Field Work 2020).

7. THE FUTURE OF MIGRATION: SOME CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

As lockdown has started easing out in the country, the migrants face Hobson's dilemma: to stay back at home without work or take the risk for a living. It has been more than a year since the lockdown was enforced. Now it seems that things have come back to a new normal. For many workers, the decision is going to be harsh and coercive. The migrant workers have slowly started disappearing from the countryside. This time, private vehicles were sent to their native places to pick them up to recruit in the cities they had left in distraught. These 'peripheral' workers from the historically marginalised social groups have started migrating back to the urban agglomerations out of utter hopelessness. Amidst all these developments, the Indian government found busy reviving economy by giving 'stimulus packages' to the capitalist class while further abating whatever laws were left to the rescue of the labouring poor. The central and state governments have already brought in various changes in the existing industrial and labour laws, or have suspended it, to serve the interest of neoliberal capitalism. The policy response towards the labouring class, especially footloose migrant workers, during the pandemic was, "more cosmetic than heralding a genuine policy shift. The future of circular migrant workers looks bleak and, in all likelihood "it may get even worse for the excluded misfits than it already has been so far." What is going to happen once this health crisis has burned itself out? Breman (2020, p. 915) argues:

The stalwarts and profiteers in the current regime of exploitation, with the ruling power elite and owners-cum-managers of big capital as its stakeholders, are determined to firmly stay on the course of neoliberalism and resume business as usual. In that eventuality, the workforce made footloose would have no option than to take to the road once again.

It can be said that the Indian government failed to seize the opportunity to provide longstanding dues of labouring poor. It is high time that the central and the state governments enable the labouring poor, especially migrant workers, with decent work opportunities and protect their de jure social, political and economic rights.

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